

Class with Miss Laura

Diane Podolsky

JOSTLING girls crowd the suffocating dressing rooms. Along the dull green walls of this nether world, lined up neatly, sit ballet bags of leather, tapestry, and plaid. Nine other girls and I charge in, pulling off our blazers and sweaters as we come.

"You're late," somebody calls out cheerily, helpfully. One of my group answers as we frantically lunge for empty hooks, "Yeah, thanks for telling us."

All around me are girls frenziedly rummaging, stripping, and pulling on pink tights. My leotard is damp. I climb into it with trepidation—I find it clammy as a wet bathing suit. I don't allow myself the luxury of stopping to think about it. I have to get my hair up.

"My hair net's completely shot. Anybody got an extra net?" I plead in anguish. No answer. The dressing room is rapidly thinning.

"Pretty please, somebody!" At length a holey net is dredged up from the murky recesses of someone's ballet case.

"Thanks a million." Now my ballet slippers. That should be all.

Breathless, I run to class in tightened feet. Outside the studio I hear music playing. I open the door gingerly and insinuate myself inside. Here is another world. For the next ninety minutes I am in a separate universe. Time, problems, and mundane matters do not exist. Ballet becomes the universe, and Miss Laura becomes the sun.

I try to take my place at the barre unobtrusively. This is impossible, for the room is very small. Everyone is doing plies. I try not to look at her.

"You're late, Diana," she announces in her familiar British accent.

"I'm sorry." I lift my submissive eyes briefly to look at the small white-haired lady before me. She tries to look stern, but her merry eyes betray her. She cannot be angry with me. I fake my way through the first exercise.

Then she goes to the piano, humming to herself as she marks a combination with her fingers. I study her as she goes over her exercise, preoccupied. Small, yet abounding in energy, she concentrates, oblivious of the class right now. Her wavy, white hair is pulled back with combs. She looks like someone's grandmother, or, better yet, like a Mrs. Santa Claus. For a moment a fleeting thought crosses my mind; it occurs to me that she doesn't fit in this room—"the little, downstairs studio." Austere and shabby it is. The ceiling is low; the lights are bright, the kind that gives one headaches. White with a strange yellow crusty substance, the walls

are peeling and cracking. The floorboards, bad in many spots, are chipped grey with occasional spots of paint which the art classes have failed to wipe up. Miss Laura doesn't belong here, even once a week; she belongs up in the big studio—the huge “big studio” that used to be the nave of the Quaker church which is now our school. Room, space, unlimited, infinite space to move, to fly, to dance—that is what Miss Laura should have. But no, in another sense the austerity of the downstairs studio matches another aspect of her. Her strict, scrupulous attention to detail, a part of her strong emphasis on an impeccable technique, on clean work—this fits the atmosphere of the downstairs studio. In the way that the room is stark, stripped of all ornaments, all superfluities, so Miss Laura is with her pristine integrity, her uncompromising, exacting standards.

“Diana!” Shaken out of my reverie, I obediently straighten myself into position. We continue through the barre, having a sprightly exercise, then a slow, controlled one.

“Turn around and do the other side.” Drops of perspiration trickle endlessly down my face and drip off my chin onto the floor. And always there is Miss Laura, treading lightly up and down the barres in her soft, black leather slippers, her eyes missing nothing. Always explaining, she tries to get us to understand exactly what she wants and why she wants it.

“I'll use you as a guinea pig, Barbara. Do it by yourself, facing the glass. Did you see what was wrong?” Then comes a careful explanation of the fault, after which we have a few moments to practice that particular point on our own.

“You know, it's very funny, but the people who always need the most practice never practice.” One girl, abashed, fusses with the ribbons on her shoes. A strict disciplinarian, Miss Laura shows us how much can be accomplished when there is order and discipline.

Now it's time to stretch, and then we go into the center. We do a pirouette exercise. She makes us practice the turns without music, clapping when we should land. Up, turn, clap. Up, turn, clap.

“It was fine except for that wobble at the end,” she tells one of the class. “Don't stand there on an angle,” she informs another, “you look tipsy. Diana, your head still inclines,” she says without comment. I avoid her eyes; I have disappointed her.

“Now for an adage. Give me the most beautiful waltz you have,” she begs the pianist. “Do a *developpé à la quatrième devant, grand rond de jambe to écarté . . .*” She explains the exercise carefully, the second time adding details like, “Look far, far away on this; here is offering position—remember that you're giving something to your audience.”

Giving something . . . my mind wanders. Miss Laura gives her heart and soul to her class, I reflect. Unbelievably demanding and exacting, she is also munificently generous. Paraphrasing Juliet, I muse, “The more she gives to us, the more she has for both are—.”

“Changements, sixteen small and sixteen large.” We warm up

our feet. "You can jump at least high enough to stretch your feet," she reproaches us.

"Now we'll do a big jump with turns. Play a Strauss, swingy waltz," she directs the pianist. She marks it gracefully, not dancing full out. There is simplicity in her lines. Her arms are light, soft. Her face is sensitive, alive, the face of a person who knows beauty, love, joy, and yes, pain, for knowledge of pain is necessary to an artist.

"Now you do it." Unspoken is her command to try to capture the essence of the step—contrast, light and shade, strong and delicate, expansive and subtle—show all of this.

The enchainement is beautiful. We travel on the preparation, we soften on the balancés, we soar on the grand jetés. We do it again and again, each time dancing it more, trying to put as much of us into it as she does.

Suddenly it is over—class is finished. We are doing reverence and then applauding. Miss Laura has one more thing to say, "Remember the class for tomorrow." Inwardly we sigh, for that means remember every count of every exercise. Yet we have no reason to complain; we realize the worth of doing this.

Wet and spent, the class disperses, some to stretch, others to change. As I stretch my warm muscles, producing a good aching pain, I think about Miss Laura, or rather not just Miss Laura, but Miss Laura, ballet and the downstairs studio—inseparable components of something much bigger. My mind wanders as I revel in the beautiful pull of muscles. Miss Laura is a beautiful person with a face as lovely as her personality. Her mischievous, elfin smile reveals her youthful attitude. Her youth is the vitality, enthusiasm, and intensity of the young combined with a beautiful, calm acceptance of life, of time. *Que sera, sera*. Miss Laura is like a warm white flame, sometimes burning softly, gently, sometimes flickering furiously. Glowing, she gives of herself always, yet never is diminished.

There is not a particular mental image I have of her, for she can be the ballet teacher in the downstairs studio, full of dignity and patience, serenely lecturing her class on the fine points of ballet . . . or she can be a winking, pixie-like sprite who loves to share a joke or make a pun, or she can be the former dancer who floats around humming Chopin nocturnes . . . and she is many, many more people whom I am not privileged to know. As I walk out of the studio back into the stuffy dressing rooms, the bigger world, I ponder, "Does she know?" I can only hope that she realizes how much I love and appreciate the Miss Laura's that I do know.

A lonely teardrop
Beckons company to share
Her pain and sorrow.

NANCY EHRHART